

# Opinion

## Livingston's Promise

After Livingston suffered the loss of two teenagers several years ago, a diverse group of people gathered to determine why our children were succumbing to suicide. The group included religious leaders, educators, parents, and a host of other concerned people. A large number of meetings resulted in the birth of a new committee: Healthy Community • Healthy Youth, known by its acronym HCHY.

The group dedicated itself to determining what could be done to help our youngsters live a happier life. The organizers decided that it should be "a collaborative partnership between youth and adults creating a community where all young people thrive." After many, many meetings and untold hours of time given by dedicated volunteers, HCHY has become an umbrella under which a large number of organizations' efforts are being coordinated. HCHY's first years were mostly organizational and there was certainly a lot to do.

The local group developed what the committee members termed, "Livingston's Promise," based on America's Promise, which had originally been declared by all of the living U.S. Presidents in 1997 at the Presidents' Summit for America's Future. The Promise included five pledges that our community should make to its young people: to provide caring adults both inside and outside the family structure; safe places for our children to grow and learn; a healthy start and future; marketable skills through effective education; and opportunities to serve. The baby steps taken when HCHY was initially organized began to grow larger. The group split into many subcommittees - all under the aegis of the HCHY - and each has become busy working to make our township into a better community by fulfilling our Promise.

In an effort to address the Promise to provide safe places for our young people, the HCHY sought a venue for them to gather. One of the group's major thrusts was to get the very teenagers and pre-teenagers it was trying to help involved in the process. In that effort, they seem to have been very successful already. The teens have formed their own branch of HCHY, known as the Community Action Club (CAC), at the high school. Now these youngsters are clamoring for action and the groups have swung into high gear.

Among the projects of HCHY and CAC is the reinvigoration of the Teen Center. The concept began nearly 20 years ago when a group of young people led by then-volunteers Joyce Mazzarella and Andrea Ubaldi, petitioned the Township Council for permission to use the former Monmouth Court School as a teen center. With some seed money and a lot of sweat equity, the youngsters transformed a portion of the school's lower floor into a lounge and soda fountain. A game room was installed on an upper floor and the gym was available for use. Although the center was only open sporadically, it was a success in its earliest years. Unfortunately, the lack of a consistent program made it fall into disuse. But the need for it has remained strong.

Now the CAC and its parent organization are working toward reinvigorating the center and it is welcome news that the young people who will be using it are being asked to help in its planning. We think this endeavor is long overdue and we hope that they get all the support they need to be successful.

Another group working to fulfill Livingston's Promise is the Strong Families Committee, which hopes to initiate a program used successfully in Bernards Township. Known as "neighborhood coffees," this program is far more than just the old-fashioned "koffee klatch" that the name implies. Instead, it is a meeting of neighbors with a trained facilitator to discuss topics of interest to the community. Because it is based on neighborhoods, the "coffees" provide a place for intergenerational dialogues in a non-confrontational and stress-free setting. They also provide an opportunity for neighbors who may not know one another to meet and get acquainted.

The HCHY is addressing the Promises for providing caring adults and for marketable skills through effective education with an extensive mentoring program. They have held two large summit meetings to organize the mentoring and are moving forward using a mentoring partnership guide provided by state and local Mentoring Partnerships. We believe that much will be said about this soon.

Addressing the Promise for a healthy start and future, the group is planning a forum on Sudden Death Syndrome (SDS) to inform the community about the importance of cardiac examinations for youngsters, especially young athletes. This is a frightening syndrome and we applaud the HCHY's efforts to educate parents about it.

And the list goes on with many more activities than can be easily listed in this space. The HCHY is working hard to fulfill Livingston's Promises and needs the entire community's support in these worthwhile efforts. As their plans unfold, we ask Livingston's residents to "pick up the ball" and help fulfill Livingston's Promise to its children.